

Review

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Martin, who intersperses history, oral literature, and personal experience, has written an impressive book. As with Martin's earlier writings, it is bound to have its critics. In that regard, he should be lauded for creating discourse, raising issues that need to be considered as we enter the millennium.

SUNY New Paltz

Laurence M. Hauptman

A FEVER IN SALEM: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials. By Laurie Winn Carlson. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee. 1999.

This is a book from which scholars will learn very little, but with which they ought to be familiar. They are likely to hear about it from their students or friends, who continue to be fascinated by the Salem witch trials. Laurie Winn Carlson offers a very attractive interpretation of the event—an interpretation that is appealing in its simplicity, if tortured in its reasoning.

In 1976, Linda Caporeal ["Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science*, April 2, 1976, pp. 21-26] attributed the afflictions of the tormented souls of Salem to hallucinogenic poisoning from the ingestion of ergot, a fungus that grows on rye during periods of abnormally high precipitation. Carlson summarizes the case made against Caporeal's thesis and weighs in with her own medical explanation—encephalitis lethargica. She draws her information almost entirely from studies of a worldwide outbreak of the disease from 1916 to 1930, that claimed more than five million victims.

Carlson argues that by comparing the symptoms reported by the afflicted of seventeenth-century Salem to those of the victims of the encephalitis epidemic of the early-twentieth century, a pattern emerges "that supports the hypothesis that the witch-hunts of New England were a response to unexplained physical and neurological behaviors resulting from an epidemic of encephalitis. In fact," she writes, "it is difficult to find anything in the record at Salem that *doesn't* [the italics are Carlson's] support" that hypothesis (xvi). Carlson goes on to attribute the other witchcraft cases of seventeenth-century New England and, even, those of the Great European Witch-Hunt, which lasted some three centuries, to the same cause.

Carlson readily admits that viral encephalitis is bred in the tropics and generally spread by mosquitoes. She explains its presence in Europe as the result of its having been transported by migratory birds from western Africa. Once in Europe, it was extracted from the birds' blood by mosquitoes, which then passed it on to the peasants. Similarly, she notes, it was brought from Africa to the West Indies and then to New England by slave ships, in whose water kegs mosquitoes bred and flourished. "By the time a ship made it to Boston or Salem," she conjectures, "mosquitoes could have infected all the passengers and their livestock" (138). That it spread more quickly in Salem village, than Boston or Salem Town, she attributes to the village's closer proximity to mosquito infested forests. That the outbreak ended abruptly in the fall of 1692, she argues, is because the air and water grew too cold for mosquitoes to survive (142).

Carlson rejects all psychological, social, or cultural explanation for what happened in Salem—Carol Karlsen [*The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987)], John Demos [*Entertaining Satan* (1982)], and Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum [*Salem Possessed* (1974)], for example—as missing the point, namely that the symptoms they interpreted as a cultural construction were so *obviously physical* (the italics are Carlson's, 122).

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Bryan F. Le Beau